

CORE COMPETENCIES



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Conquering conflict

Education and understanding help managers weather staff-related storms

By Julie E. Williamson

Virtually all senior housing operators experience conflict. If not properly addressed, the problem can lead to staff turnover, absences, eroded teamwork and even lawsuits. Worse, when destructive conflict goes unchecked, it can harm resident care and satisfaction.

Mitigating those risks requires managers to know the difference between healthy and destructive conflict and to be trained to facilitate effective communication and create a positive working environment, despite employee differences.

“Conflict can be defined as differences in viewpoints, and that doesn’t have to be a bad thing,” says Kiran Dintyala, M.D., MPH, a physician in Palm Springs, CA, and a stress management and conflict resolution expert. “Conflict can be healthy and lead to even better relationships and outcomes if managers and employees are given the right [tools] to address it in a productive way.”

Managers must know the difference between healthy and destructive conflict.

Training gains

A proactive approach to conflict resolution hinges on proactive, formal training for all managers and employees.

“Focus not just on individual competencies, but skills to coach, facilitate and mentor others during difficult conversations,” recommends Nate Regier, Ph.D., an author and expert in conflict communication.

For United Hebrew of New Rochelle, a seniors housing and care community in New Rochelle, NY, a cultural change model called the WOW Initiative has garnered higher levels of employee satisfaction and teamwork, reduced turnover and improved resident outcomes.

“We work with our staff to help them understand they have multiple times a day to ‘wow’ their colleagues and our residents — even when things get sticky with a colleague,” notes Rita Mabli, president and CEO of United Hebrew of New Rochelle. Through the initiative, staff

are trained on emotional intelligence, which is based on a foundation of self-awareness and self-regulation, Mabli explains.

“This helps in situations when personalities collide,” she says.

Managers play a key role in the process, helping their teams understand their emotional triggers and recognize they are in full control of how they react to conflict or stressful situations. If things get heated, employees are encouraged to adopt the community’s “SOS” approach: Stop, Oxygenate (breathe) and Start asking questions, the latter of which Mabli says helps employees dial down the emotion by gaining a better understanding of their colleague’s perspective on the situation at hand.

“We also focus on the team’s common purpose and desired outcome, which is happy residents and ‘wow’ moments,” she adds. Also, team members are trained to listen deeply to pinpoint what their colleagues may know that could help resolve an issue that is causing concern. ■

5 TIPS FOR MANAGING HOSTILE FAMILIES

Even the best providers sometimes will face emotional or hostile resident family members. Physician and stress management expert Kiran Dintyala, M.D., MPH, shares five tips for de-escalating a tense situation.

1. Do not overreact.
2. Excuse yourself from the room momentarily to think about the situation with a clear mind — away from the emotion.
3. Ask for a colleague’s opinion and how best to address the situation.
4. Calmly communicate with the family member. Ask him or her to explain why he or she is upset. Listen intently and try to understand this person’s perspective.
5. If the situation remains hostile, ask a supervisor to intervene.